

# The Mariner

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# Respecting Their World

*The Ocean Conservation Society Discusses Appropriate Manners in Which to Interact with Local Wildlife*



Photo Pat Reynolds

*Now that the weather is warm there is plenty of ocean wildlife in our local waters. The folks from the Ocean Conservation Society here in Marina del Rey sent this over to both encourage boaters to enjoy what's here but also to remind us of the laws and manner in which they suggest we should interact.*

One can spot most baleen whales occurring in the Eastern North Pacific, over a dozen species of dolphins, various pinnipeds, even Sea Otters. Some marine mammals, like bottlenose dolphins, short-beaked and long-beaked common dolphins, risso's dolphins, sea lions and harbor seals are year-round inhabitants.

Others like killer whales, pacific white-sided dolphins, dall's porpoises and sperm whales are occasional visitors, while gray, blue, fin, sei, minke, and humpback whales pass through the bight during yearly migrations.

The Southern California coastal region also serves as a regular corridor for the inshore population of bottlenose dolphins that move along the California and Baja coast in search of prey. Because they live and hunt close to our shores, these dolphins are easily observed from land. Cetaceans spend all their time at sea but pinnipeds come ashore to mate, give birth, molt and rest.

## **A few basic rules to follow and share with others:**

Observing marine mammals in the wild can be a rewarding and educational experience, but we must respect them and their habitat. Whales, dolphins and pinnipeds are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972. It's a violation of federal law to harass or harm them and penalties can include up to one year imprisonment and fines of up to \$20,000. Harassment includes pursuit, torment or annoyance of a marine mammal or attempting to do so.

**Distance:** You should remain at least 100 yards (300 feet) from cetaceans and at least 50 yards (150 feet) from pinnipeds.

**Observation:** When observing these animals at sea, make sure your actions do not cause any change in their behavior.

- Upon sighting marine mammals stop your vessel, observe and then attempt to parallel the animal's course.
- NEVER follow behind, approach animals head-on, encircle or trap cetaceans between your vessel and shore.
- If you are on a vessel and cetaceans approach you, maintain your course and speed. If the animals cut your course, put the boat in neutral and wait until they clear your vessel.

- Avoid sudden changes to vessel speed and direction. Dolphins and whales may surface unpredictably at any time or location.
- Respect the law even if you are on a kayak, PWC, surfboard or swimming. Avoid disturbing the normal behavior of marine mammals.
- NEVER feed, touch or ride marine mammals; it is against the law! For more information go to: [www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/laws](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/laws)

**Duration:** The animals in our 'ocean backyard' need our help to survive and flourish, so limit your viewing time to less than 1/2 hour, and do not crowd the animals to avoid creating unnecessary stress.

The ocean is a remarkable ecosystem, full of life and resources, but it's also a fragile world. Pollution, climate change and overfishing are only a few of the problems affecting our waters, but the real issue is the cumulative human impact on our oceans.

Today, numerous species of marine mammals are threatened, endangered or critically endangered and a few have already disappeared within the past several decades. Another significant threat to whales is vessel strikes. In recent years, endangered blue whales - reaching up to 90 feet in length - have become regular visitors to

the Southern California bight using this area as foraging grounds.

These whales, unfortunately, tend to move along the same routes used by ships in the commercial shipping lanes. Fatal ship strikes are a recurrent problem. Harassment by humans, even when intentions are good, can also adversely affect the normal behavior of whales, dolphins and other marine mammals during feeding, mating and other activities. Let's be careful to minimize our impact and respect marine mammals while enjoying their presence and learning from them.

**Report incidents of harassment of marine mammals to:** National Marine Fisheries Service 24hr hotline 800.853.1964, your state or local enforcement agency, harbor patrol, or local Coast Guard office. Boaters can use VHF channel 16 to contact authorities.

**You can help marine mammals in distress:** If you see a stranded animal, keep your distance and call NMFS Southwest Regional Office at 562.980.3230. Please report injured, entangled, or ship-struck whales to the 24/7 WET hotline at: 877.SOS.WHALE (877.767.9425)

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